

Community Engagement Key Learnings

The key learnings from community engagement practice have reinforced that community engagement is not a matter of one 'best practice'. Rather, it involves a flexible process of interaction based on the fundamentals of good engagement. Looking across a range of engagement experiences raises some of these key principles including the importance of local relationships, the continuity of engagement, having appropriate avenues for involvement, and dealing with anger and conflict.

Trust and Relationships Successful engagement activities depend on relationships and trust between individuals — between community members and with people in support agencies. At the community level, local personal relationships mediate collaboration between communities and government agencies. Relationships between agency staff and community members as well as the trust of 'champions' have been required for local people to be involved. Communication has meant far more than keeping people informed — the way people have communicated with each other has been important to building trust and respect. Relationships have built on themselves with people developing stronger cooperative links as community work progressed. As actions took place, relationships grew, making planning and action easier and more comfortable.

Go to them Traditional approaches to engagement have mainly been based on specific events such as public meetings and workshops. While still an option, these events have required people to participate in semi-formal ways that require them to 'come to' government or industry. These events can also self-select participants who are particularly confident, articulate and motivated about particular issues. They can easily present barriers for the participation of minority groups and others. A successful alternative has been to 'go to them' — to consider and link with the natural hubs in communities that people congregate around such as a local school, sporting groups or community organizations.

Opportunities for Deliberation Engagement experiences have also highlighted the importance of fostering deliberation of community issues. In many communities there are limited opportunities for individuals and groups to openly share their perspective on issues. Many lobby groups rely on advocating a particular view to government and industry. Yet the discovery of new options and compromise depends on non-defensive deliberation and dialogue. Successful community engagement processes have created a 'space' for this to happen and provided a process for differences to be shared in a functional way.

Dealing with anger and the legacy of poor previous engagement A major inhibitor of community engagement has been poor engagement experiences in the past, feelings of anger and disillusionment with the response of government and industry, and people feeling that they have no influence or seeing no change from engagement. The reality of many engagement experiences has been to try and re-engage with people or work with considerable community anger and frustration. This increases the importance of engagement processes 'starting where people are at' — understanding and genuinely listening to frustrations and concerns. Part of the process of many engagement experiences has involved reflection on poor previous engagement and developing clear expectations. The rebuilding of trust has relied on small successful interactions and follow-up on visible actions. Personal reliability and relationships have been important to trust being slowly rebuilt.

Coordination and avoiding over-consultation A complaint many community people have about engagement is the lack of coordination between agencies and others in working with communities. People become over-taxed in providing input and disillusioned with the ad hoc nature of engagement. There is an urgent need for agencies and others to have a coordinated approach to engagement where input to a number of agencies can be provided at one time, or where clear linkages between issues are considered prior to engagement. Cooperation between governments seems to work best on a focused project. However, the broader networks and commitment developed by community efforts also provide a basis for collaboration between agencies.

Tailormade opportunities Another learning from engagement practice has been the need to develop multiple ways for involvement that are suited to different stakeholders. Traditional engagement has often taken a 'one size fits all' approach and assumed that all who are interested can be involved engagement practice has focused on better understanding the ways various stakeholder groups prefer to participate.

Continuity and sustainability of engagement

There is still considerable effort required to better support the continuity and long-term sustainability of engagement. This involves the continuity of personal contact, ensuring engagement fosters local ownership and empowerment and better planning transitions between 'outside' support and community self-reliance. A key aspect of practice has been local facilitators providing an 'on the ground' presence in communities, connecting people to information and resources, and following up on plans.

Networks of engagement

Modern practice is fostering the development of, engagement between community members and organizations within communities, rather than engagement between just two actors. This is involving engagement that facilitates collaboration between communities and stakeholder groups, as opposed to relatively independent input to government or industry decision-making.

Enhancing practice

Experience has shown that community engagement relies on a diverse flexible set of principles, structures and methods. It is not just about increasing community participation in what government or industry does, but rather changing the culture of how community members relate to government, private enterprise and each other. It involves an incremental change process that incorporates 'old' and 'new' roles, builds on existing circumstances, and allows community linkages to mature and develop rather than simply proliferate.

Improved engagement practice challenges government agencies and other major organizations, to better manage duality. They need to manage representative and participative democracy — to not just be an enabler, but both a deliverer and enabler. Ultimately, improved practice needs to be based on the values and principles of appropriate engagement.

Developing community engagement practice involves three key aspects:

Principles, values and assumptions — a clear set of values shared between agencies and communities that underpin community engagement and inclusion.

Structures, services and mechanisms that mediate engagement including organizational structures, arrangements and processes that support relationships and collaborative networks.

Practice — 'grassroots'-level attitudes, relationships, individual behavior, techniques and methods form an everyday modus operandi for community engagement.